

Neighbour
Clifford D Simak

Coon Valley is a pleasant place, but there's no denying it's sort of off the beaten track and it's not a place where you can count on getting rich because the farms are small and a lot of the ground is rough. You can farm the bottom lands, but the hill-sides are only good for pasture and the roads are just dirt roads, impassable at certain times of year.

The old-timers, like Bert Smith and Jingo Harris and myself, are well satisfied to stay here, for we grew up with the country and we haven't any illusions about getting rich and we'd feel strange and out-of-place anywhere but in the valley. But there are others, newcomers, who move in and get discouraged after a while and up and move away, so there usually is a farm or two, standing idle, waiting to be sold.

We are just plain dirt farmers, with emphasis on the dirt, for we can't afford a lot of fancy machinery and we don't go in for blooded stock--but there's nothing wrong with us; we're just everyday, the kind of people you meet all over these United

States. Because we're out of the way and some of the families have lived here for so long, I suppose you could say that we have gotten clannish. But that doesn't mean we don't like outside folks; it just means we've lived so long together that we've got to know and like one another and are satisfied with things just as they are.

We have radios, of course, and we listen to the programmes and the news, and some of us take daily papers, but I'm afraid that we may be a bit provincial, for it's fairly hard to get us stirred up much about world happenings. There's so much o interest right here in the valley we haven't got the time to worry about all those outside things. I imagine you'd call us conser~vative, for most of us vote Republican without even wonderin why and there's none of us who has much time for all thi government interference in the farming business.

The valley has always been a pleasant place--not only th land, but the people in it, and we've always been fortunate i the new neighbours that we' get. Despite new ones coming i every year or so, we've never had a really bad one and th~ means a lot to us.

But we always worry a little when one of the new ones up an, moves away and we speculate among ourselves, wonderin what kind of people will buy or rent the vacant farm.

The old Lewis farm had been abandoned for a long time, th buildings all run down and gone to ruin and the fields gor back to grass. A dentist over at Hopkins Corners had rented for several years and run some cattle in it, driving out on weel ends to see how they were doing. We used to wonder every no' and then if anyone would ever farm the place again, but final] we quit wondering, for the buildings had fallen into such di: repair that we figured no one ever would. I went in one day an talked to the banker at Hopkins Corners, who had the rentin of the place, and told him I'd like to take it over if the denti~ ever gave it up. But he told me the owners, who lived i

Chicago then, were anxious to sell rather than to rent i although he didn't seem too optimistic that anyonewould buy i

Then one spring a new family moved onto the farm and : time we learned it had been sold and that the new family's nan was Heath--Reginald Heath. And Bert Smith said to m

"Reginald! That's a hell of a name for a farmer !" But that w; all he said.

Jingo Harris stopped by one day, coming home from tow: when he saw Heath out in the yard, to pass the time of day. was a neighbourly thing to do, of course, and Heath seem glad to have him stop, although Jingo said he seemed to be a

funny kind of man to be a farmer.

"He's a foreigner," Jingo told me. "Sort of dark. Like he might be a Spaniard or from one of those other countries. I don't know how he got that Reginald. Reginald is English and Heath's no Englishman."

Later on we heard that the Heaths weren't really Spanish, but were Rumanians or Bulgarians and that they were refugees from the Iron Curtain.

But Spanish, or Rumanian, or Bulgarian, the Heaths were workers. There was Heath and his wife and a half-grown girl and all three of them worked all the blessed time. They paid attention to their business and didn't bother anyone and because of this we liked them, although we didn't have much to do with them. Not that we didn't want to or that they didn't want us to; it's just that in a community like ours new folks sort of have to grow in instead of being taken in.

Heath had an old beaten-up, wired-together tractor that made a lot of noise, and as soon as the soil was dry enough to plough he started out to turn over the fields that through the years had grown up to grass. I used to wonder if he worked all night long, for many times when I went to bed I heard the tractor running. Although that may not be as late as it sounds to city dwellers, for here in the valley we go to bed early--and get up early, too.

One night after dark I set out to hunt some cows, a couple of fence-jumping heifers that gave me lots of trouble. Just let a man come in late from work and tired and maybe it's raining a little and dark as the inside of a cat and those two heifers would turn up missing and I'd have to go and hunt them. I tried all the different kinds of pokes and none of them did any good. When a heifer gets to fence-jumping there isn't much that can be done with her.

So I lit a lantern and set out to hunt for them, but I hunted for two hours and didn't find a trace of them. I had just about decided to give up and go back home when I heard the soun~ a tractor running and realized that I was just above the field of the old Lewis place. To get home I'd have to go ri past the field and I figured it might be as well to wait whe reached the field until the tractor came around and ask He if he had seen the heifers.

It was a dark night, with thin clouds hiding the stars an~ wind blowing high in the treetops and there was a smell of n in the air. Heath, I figured, probably was staying out extra 1~ to finish up the field ahead of the coming rain, althought remember that I thought he was pushing things just a lit hard. Already he was far ahead of all the others in the vall with his ploughing.

So I made my way down the steep hillside and waded 1 creek at a shallow place I knew and while I was doing thi heard the tractor make a complete round of the field. I look for the headlight, but I didn't see it and I thought probably 1 trees had hidden it from me.

I reached the edge of the field and climbed through the fen walking out across the furrows to intercept the tractor. I he~ it make the turn to the east of me and start down the fi~ toward me and although I could hear the noise of it, the wasn't any light.

I found the last furrow and stood there waiting, sort wondering, not too alarmed as yet, how Heath managed drive the rig without any light. I thought that maybe he had c eyes and could see in the dark and although it seemed fun] later when I remembered it, the idea that a man might have > eyes did not seem funny then.

The noise kept getting louder and it seemed to be comi: pretty close, when all at once the tractor rushed out of the da and seemed to leap at me. I guess I must have been afraid th it would run over me, for I jumped back a yard or two, with r heart up in my neck. But I needn't have bothered, for I was o of the way to start with.

The tractor went on past me and I waved the lantern and yelled for Heath to stop and as I waved the lantern the light was thrown onto the rear of the tractor and I saw that there was no one on it.

A hundred things went through my mind, but the one idea that stuck was that Heath had fallen off the tractor and might be lying injured, somewhere in the field.

I ran after the tractor, thinking to shut it down before it got loose and ran into a tree or something, but by the time I reached it, it had reached a turn and it was making that turn as neatly as if it had been broad daylight and someone had been driving it.

I jumped up on the drawbar and grabbed the seat, hauling myself, up. I reached out a hand, grabbing for the throttle, but with my hand upon the metal I didn't pull it back. The tractor had completed the turn now and was going down the furrowm and there was something else.

Take an old tractor, now--one that wheezed and coughed and hammered and kept threatening to fall apart, like this one did--and you are bound to get a lot of engine vibration. But in this tractor there was no vibration. It ran along as smooth as a high-priced car and the only jolts you got were when the wheels

hit a bump or slight gully in the field.

I stood there, hanging on to the lantern with one hand and clutching the throttle with the other, and I didn't do a thing. I just rode down to the point where the tractor started to make another turn. Then I stepped off and went on home. I didn't hunt for Heath lying in the field, for I knew he wasn't there.

I suppose I wondered how it was possible, but I didn't really fret myself too much trying to figure it all out. I imagine, in the first place, I was just too numb. You may worry a lot about little things that don't seem quite right, but when you run into a big thing, like that self-operating tractor, you sort of give up automatically, knowing that it's too big for your brain to handle, that it's something you haven't got a chance of solving or live with. So your mind rejects it.

I got home and stood out in the barnyard for a moment, listening. The wind was blowing fairly hard by then and the first drops of rain were falling, but every now and then, when the wind would quiet down, I could hear the tractor.

I went inside the house and Helen and the kids were all in bed and sound asleep, so I didn't say anything about it that night. And the next morning, when I had a chance to think about it, I didn't say anything at all. Mostly, I suppose, because I knew no one would believe me and that I'd have to take a lot of kidding about automatic tractors.

Heath got his ploughing done and his crops in, well ahead of everyone in the valley. The crops came up in good shape and we had good growing weather; then along in June we got a spell of wet, and everyone got behind with corn ploughing because you can't go out in the field when the ground is soggy. All of us ohored around our places, fixing fences and doing other odd jobs, cussing out the rain and watching the weeds grow like mad in the unploughed field.

All of us, that is, except Heath. His corn was clean as a whistle and you had to hunt to find a weed. Jingo stopped by one day and asked him how he managed, but Heath just laughed a little, in that quiet way of his, and talked of something else.

The first apples finally were big enough for green-apple pies and there is no one in the country makes better green-apple pies than Helen. She wins prizes with her pies every year at the county fair and she is proud of them.

One day she wrapped up a couple of pies and took them over to the Heaths. It's a neighbourly way we have of doing in the valley, with the women running back and forth from one neighbour to another with their cooking. Each of them has some dish she likes to show off to the neighbours and it's a sort of harmless way of bragging.

Helen and the Heaths got along just swell. She was late in getting home and I was starting supper, with the kids yelling they were hungry when-do-we-eat-around-here, when she finally showed up.

She was full of talk about the Heaths--how they had fixed up the house, you never would have thought anyone could do so much to such a terribly run-down place as they had, and about the garden they had--especially about the garden. It was a big one, she said, and beautifully taken care of and it was full of vegetables she had never seen before. The funniest things you ever saw, she said. Not the ordinary kind of vegetables.

We talked some about those vegetables, speculating that maybe the Heaths had brought the seeds out with them from behind the Iron Curtain, although so far as I could remember, vegetables were vegetables, no matter where you were. They grew the same things in Russia or Rumania or Timbuktu as we did. And, anyhow, by this time I was getting a little sceptical about that story of their escaping from Rumania.

But we didn't have the time for much serious speculation on the Heaths, although there was plenty of casual gossip going around the neighbourhood. Haying came along and then the small-grain harvest and everyone was busy. The hay was good and the small-grain crop was fair, but it didn't look like we'd get much corn. For we hit a drought. That's the way it goesm too much rain in June, not enough in August.

We watched the corn and watched the sky and felt hopeful when a cloud showed up, but the clouds never meant a thing. It just seems at times that God isn't on your side.

Then one morning Jingo Harris showed up and stood around, first on one foot, then the other, talking to me while I worked on an old corn binder that was about worn out and which it didn't look nohow I'd

need to use that year.

"Jingo," I said, after I'd watched him fidget for an hour or more, "Heath got rain last night," he said.

"No one else did," I told him.

"I guess you're right," said Jingo. "Heath's the only one."

He told me how he'd gone to cut through Heath's north cornfield, carrying back a couple of balls of binder twine he'd borrowed from Bert Smith. It wasn't until he'd crawled through the fence that he noticed the field was wet, soaked by a heavy rain.

"It must have happened in the night," he said.

He thought it was funny, but figured maybe there had been a shower across the lower end of the valley, although as a rule rains travel up and down the valley, not across it. But when he had crossed the corner of the field and crawled through the fence, he noticed it hadn't rained at all. So he went back and walked around the field and the rain had fallen on the field, but nowhere else. It began at the fence and ended at the fence.

When he'd made a circuit of the field he sat down on one of the balls of twine and tried to get it all thought out, but it made no sense--furthermore, it was plain unbelievable.

Jingo is a thorough man. He likes to have all the evidence and know all there is to know before he makes up his mind. So he went over to Heath's second corn patch, on the west side of the valley. And once again he found that it had rained on that field--on the field, but not around the field.

"What do you make of it?" Jingo asked me and I said I didn't know. I came mighty close to telling him about the unmanned tractor, but I thought better of it. After all, there was no point in getting the neighbourhood stirred up.

After Jingo left I got in the car and drove over to the Heath farm, intending to ask him if he could loan me his posthole digger for a day or two. Not that I was going to dig any post-holes, but you have to have some excuse for showing up at a neighbour's place.

I never got a chance to ask him for that posthole digger, though. Once I got there I never even thought of it.

Heath was sitting on the front steps of the porch and he seemed glad to see me. He came down to the car and shook my hand and said, "It's good to see you, Calvin." The way he said it made me feel friendly and sort of important, too--especially that Calvin business, for everyone else just calls me Cal. I'm not downright sure, in fact, that anyone in the neighbourhood remembers that my name is Calvin.

"I'd like to show you around the place," he said. "We've done some fixing up."

Fixing up wasn't exactly the word for it. The place was spick- and-span. It looked like some of those Pennsylvania and

Connecticut farms you see in the magazines. The house and all the other buildings had been ramshackle with all the paint peeled off them and looking as if they might fall down at any minute. But now they had a sprightly, solid look and they gleamed with paint. They didn't look new, of course, but they looked as if they'd always been well taken care of and painted every year. The fences were all fixed up and painted, too, and the weeds were cut and a couple of old unsightly scrap-lumber piles had been cleaned up and burned. Heath had even tackled an old iron and machinery junk pile and had it sorted out.

"There was a lot to do," said Heath, "but I feel it's worth it. I have an orderly soul. I like to have things neat."

Which might be true, of course, but he'd done it all in less than six months' time. He'd come to the farm in early March and it was only August and he'd not only put in some hundred acres of crops and done all the other farm work, but he'd got the place fixed up. And that wasn't possible, I told myself. One man couldn't do it, not even with his wife and daughter helping--not even if he worked twenty-four hours a day and didn't stop to eat. Or unless he could take time and stretch it out to make one hour equal three or four.

I trailed along behind Heath and thought about that time-stretching business and was pleased at myself for thinking of it, for it isn't often that I get foolish thoughts that are likewise pleasing. Why, I thought, with

a deal like that you could stretch out any day so you could get all the work done you wanted to.

And if you could stretch out time, maybe you could compress it, too, so that a trip to a dentist, for example, would only seem to take a minute.

Heath took me out to the garden and Helen had been right.

There were the familiar vegetables, of course---cabbages and tomatoes and squashes and all the other kinds that are found in every garden--but in addition to this there were as many others I had never seen before. He told me the names of them and they seemed to be queer names then, although now it seems a little strange to think they once had sounded queer, for now everyone in the valley grows these vegetables and it seems like we have always had them.

As we talked he pulled up and picked some of the strange vegetables and put them in a basket he had brought along.

"You'll want to try them all," he said. "Some of them you may not like at first, but there are others that you will. This one you eat raw, sliced like a tomato, and this one is best boiled, although you can bake it, too "

I wanted to ask him how he'd come on the vegetables and where they had come from, but he didn't give me a chance; he kept on telling me about them and how to cook them and that this one was a winter keeper and that one you could can and he gave me one to eat raw and it was rather good.

We'd got to the far end of the garden and were starting to come back when Heath's wife ran around the corner of the house.

Apparently she didn't see me at first or had forgotten I was there, for she called to him and the name she called him wasn't Reginald or Reggie, but a foreign-sounding name. I won't even try to approximate it, for even at the time I wasn't able to recall it a second after hearing it. It was like no word I'd ever heard before.

Then she saw me and stopped running and caught her breath, and a moment later said she'd been listening in on the party line and that Bert Smith's little daughter, Ann, was terribly sick.

"They called the doctor," she said, "but he is out on calls and he won't get there in time."

"Reginald," she said, "the symptoms sound like "

And she said another name that was like none I'd ever heard or expect to hear again.

Watching Heath's face, I could swear I saw it pale despite his olive tinge of skin.

"qui~k!" tt~ %lx~t%~ ~I~ ~,bb~6 m~ by the arm. we ran around in front to his old clunk of a car. He threw the basket of vegetables in the back seat and jumped behind the wheel. I scrambled in after him and tried to close the door, but it wouldn't close. The lock kept slipping loose and I had to hang on to the door so it wouldn't bang.

We lit out of there like a turpented dog and the noise that old ear made was enough to deafen one. Despite my holding on to it, the door kept banging and all the fenders rattled and there was every other kind of noise you'd expect a junk-heap car to make, with an extra two or three thrown in.

I wanted to ask him what he planned to do, but I was having trouble framing the question in my mind and even if I had known how to phrase it I doubt he could have heard me with all the racket that the car was making.

So I hung on as best I could and tried to keep the door from banging and all at once it seemed to me the car was making more noise than it had any call to. Just like the old haywire tractor made more noise than any tractor should. Too much noise, by far, for the way that it was running. Just like on the tractor, there was no engine vibration and despite all the banging and the clanking we were making time. As I've said, our valley roads are none too good, but even so I swear there were places we hit seventy and we went around sharp comers where, by rights, we should have gone into the ditch at the speed that we were going, but the car just seemed to settle down and hug the road and we never even skidded.

We pulled up in front of Bert's place and Heath jumped and ran up the walk, with me following him.

Amy Smith came to the door and I could see that she'd bt crying, and she looked a little surprised to see the two of us

We stood there for a moment without saying anything, until Heath spoke to her and here is a funny

thing: Heath wearing a pair of ragged overalls and a sweat-stained shirt he didn't have a hat and his hair was all rumbled up, but th was a single instant when it seemed to me that he was w, dressed in an expensive business suit and that he took off hat and bowed to Amy.

"I understand", he said, "that the little girl is sick. Mayl~ can help."

I don't know if Amy had seen the same thing that I h seemed to see, but she opened the door and stood to one side that we could enter.

"In there," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Heath, and went into the roo~

Amy and I stood there for a moment, then she turned to and I could see the tears in her eyes again.

"Cal, she's awful sick," she said.

I nodded miserably, for now the spell was gone and comm~ sense was coming back again and I wondered at the madness this farmer who thought that he could help a little girl who w terribly sick. And at my madness for standing there, witho even going in the room with him.

But just then Heath came out of the room and closed tl door softly behind him.

"She's sleeping now," he said to Amy. "She'll be all right

Then, without another word, he walked out of the door. hesitated a moment, looking at Amy, wondering what to d~

And it was pretty plain there was nothing I could do. So followed him.

We drove back to his farm at a sober rate of speed, but t[car banged and thumped just as bad as ever.

"Runs real good," I yelled at him.

He smiled a bit.

"I keep it tinkered up," he yelled back at me.

When we got to his place, I got out of his car and walked over to my own.

"You forgot the vegetables," he called after me.

So I went back to get them.

"Thanks a lot," I said.

"Any time," he told me.

I looked straight at him, then, and said: "It sure would be fine if we could get some rain. It would mean a lot to us. A soaking rain right now would save the corn."

"Come again," he told me. "It was good to talk with you."

And that night it rained, all over the valley, a steady, soaking rain, and the corn was saved. And Ann got well.

The doctor, when he finally got to Bert's, said that she had passed the crisis and was already on the mend. One of those virus things, he said. A lot of it around. Not like the old days, he said, before they got to fooling around with all their miracle drugs, mutating viruses right and left. Used to be, he said, a doctor knew what he was treating, but he don't know any more.

I don't know if Bert or Amy told Doc about Heath, although

I imagine that they didn't. After all, you don't tell a doctor that a neighbour cured your child. And there might have been someone who would have been orhery enough to try to bring a charge against Heath for practising medicine without a licence, although that would have been pretty hard to prove. But the story got around the valley and there was a lot of talk. Heath, I heard, had been a famous doctor in Vienna before he'd made his getaway. But I didn't believe it. I don't even believe those who started the story believed it, but that's the way it goes in a neighbourhood like ours.

That story, and others, made quite a flurry for a month or so, but then it quieted down and you could see that the Heaths had become one of us and belonged to the valley. Bert went over and had quite a talk with Heath and the women-folks took to calling Mrs. Heath on the telephone, with some of those who were listening in breaking in to say a word or two, thereby initiating Mrs. Heath into the round-robin telephone con- versations that are going on all the time on our valley party line, with it getting so that you have to bust in on them and tell them to get off the line when you want to make an important call.

We had Heath out with us on our coon hunts that fall and some of the young bloods started paying

attention to Heath's daughter. It was almost as if the Heaths were old-time residents.

As I've said before, we've always been real fortunate in getting in good neighbours.

When things are going well, time has a way of flowing along so smoothly that you aren't conscious of its passing, and that was the way it was in the valley.

We had good years, but none of us paid much attention to that. You don't pay much attention to the good times, you get so you take them for granted. It's only when bad times come along that you look back and realize the good times you have had.

A year or so ago I was just finishing up the morning chores when a car with a New York licence pulled up at the barnyard gate. It isn't very often we see an out-of-state licence plate in the valley, so I figured that it probably was someone who had gotten lost and had stopped to ask directions. There was a man and woman in the front seat and three kids and a dog in the back seat and the car was new and shiny.

I was carrying the milk up from the barn and when the man got out I put the pails down on the ground and waited for him.

He was a youngish sort of fellow and he looked intelligent and he had good manners.

He told me his name was Rickard and that he was a New York newspaperman on vacation and had dropped into the valley on his way out west to check some information.

It was the first time, so far as I knew, that the valley had ever been of any interest newswise and I said so. I said we never did much here to get into the news.

"It's no scandal," Rickard told me, "if that is what you're thinking. It's just a matter of statistics."

There are a lot of times when I don't catch a situation as quickly as I should, being a sort of deliberate type, but it seems to me now that as soon as he said statistics I could see it coming.

"I did a series of farm articles a few months back," said

Rickard, "and to get my information I had to go through a lot of government statistics. I never got so sick of anything in my entire life."

"And ?" I asked, not feeling too well myself.

"I found some interesting things about this valley," he went on. "I remember that I didn't catch it for a while. Went on past the figures for a ways. Almost missed the significance, in fact.

Then I did a double-take and backed up and looked at them again. The full story wasn't in that report, of course. Just a hint of something. So I did some more digging and came up with other facts."

I tried to laugh it off, but he wouldn't let me.

"Your weather, for one thing," he said. "Do you realize you've had perfect weather for the past ten years ?"

"The weather's been pretty good," I admitted.

"It wasn't always good. I went back to see."

"That's right," I said. "It's been better lately."

"Your crops have been the best they've ever been in the last ten years."

"Better seed," I said. "Better ways of farming."

He grinned at me. "You guys haven't changed your way of farming in the last quarter century."

And he had me there, of course.

"There was an army worm invasion two years ago," he said.

"It hit all around you, but you got by scot-free."

"We were lucky. I remember we said so at the time."

"I checked health records," he said. "Same thing once again.

For ten solid years. No measles, no chickenpox, no pneumonia.

No nothing. One death in ten full years---complications attendant on old age."

"Old Man Parks," I said. "He was going on to ninety. Fine old gentleman."

"You see," said Rickard.

I did see.

The fellow had the figures. He had tracked it down, this thing we hadn't even realized, and he had us cold.

"What do you want me to do about it?" I asked.

"I want to talk to you about a neighbour."

"I won't talk about any of my neighbours. Why don't you talk to him yourself?"

"I tried to, but he wasn't home. Fellow down the road said he'd gone into town. Whole family had gone into town."

"Reginald Heath," I said. There wasn't much sense in playing dumb with Rickard, for he knew all the angles.

"That's the man. I talked to folks in town. Found out he'd never had to have any repair work done on any of his machinery or his car. Has the same machinery he had when he started farming. And it was worn out then."

"He takes good care of it," I told him. "He keeps it tinkered up."

"Another thing," said Rickard. "Since he's been here he hasn't bought a drop of gasoline."

I'd know the rest of it, of course, although I'd never stopped to think about it. But I didn't know about the gasoline. I must have shown my surprise, for Rickard grinned at me.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"A story."

"Heath's the man to talk to. I don't know a thing to help you."

And even when I said it I felt easy in my mind. I seemed to have an instinctive faith that Heath could handle the situation, that he'd know just what to do.

But after breakfast I couldn't settle down to work. I was pruning the orchard, a job I'd been putting off for a year or two and that badly needed doing. I kept thinking of that business of Heath not buying gasoline and that night I'd found the tractor ploughing by itself and how smooth both the car and tractor ran despite all the noise they made.

So I laid down my pruning hook and shears and struck out across the fields. I knew the Heath family was in town, but I don't think it would have made any difference to me if they'd been at home. I think I would have gone just the same. For more than ten years now, I realized, I'd been wondering about that tractor and it was time that I found out.

I found the tractor in the machine shed and I thought maybe

I'd have some trouble getting into it. But I didn't have a bit. I slipped the catches and the hood lifted up and I found exactly what I had thought I'd find, except that I hadn't actually worked out in my mind the picture of what I'd find underneath that hood.

It was just a block of some sort of shining metal that looked almost like a cube of heavy glass. It wasn't very big, but it had a massive look about it, as if it might have been a heavy thing to lift.

You could see the old bolt holes where the original internal combustion engine had been mounted and a heavy piece of some sort of metal had been fused across the frame to seat that little power plant. And up above the shiny cube was an apparatus of some sort. I didn't take the time to find out how it worked, but I could see that it was connected to the exhaust and

I knew it was a dingus that disguised the power plant. You know how in electric trains they have it fixed up so that the locomotive goes chuff-chuff and throws out a stream of smoke.

Well, that was what that contraption was. It threw out little puffs of smoke and made a tractor noise.

I stood there looking at it and I wondered why it was, if

Heath had an engine that worked better than an internal combustion engine, he should have gone to so much trouble to hide the fact he had it. If I'd had a thing like that, I knew, I'd make the most of it. I'd get someone to back me and go into production and in no time at all I'd be stinking rich. And there'd been nothing in the world to prevent Heath from doing that. But instead he'd fixed the tractor so it looked and sounded like an ordinary tractor and he'd fixed his car to make so much noise that it hid the fact it had a new type motor. Only he had overdone it. He'd made both the car and tractor make more noise than they should. And he'd missed an important bet in not buying gasoline. In his place I'd bought the stuff, just the way you should, and thrown it away or burned it to get rid of it.

It almost seemed to me that Heath might have had something he was hiding all these years, that he'd tried deliberately to keep himself unnoticed. As if he might really have been a refugee from the Iron

Curtain--or from somewhere else.

I put the hood back in place again and snapped the catches shut and when I went out I was very careful to shut the machine shed door securely.

I went back to my pruning and I did quite a bit of thinking and while I was doing it I realized that I'd been doing this same thinking, piecemeal, ever since that night I'd found the tractor running by itself. Thinking of it in snatches and not trying to correlate all my thinking and that way it hadn't added up to much, but now it did and I suppose I should have been a little scared.

But I wasn't scared. Reginald Heath was a neighbour, and a good one, and we'd gone hunting and fishing together and we'd helped one another with haying and threshing and one thing and another and I liked the man as well as anyone I had ever known. Sure, he was a little different and he had a funny kind of tractor and a funny kind of car and he might even have a way of stretching time and since he'd come into the valley we'd been fortunate in weather and in health. All true, of course, but nothing to be scared of. Nothing to be scared of, once you knew the man.

For some reason or other I remembered the time several years before when I'd dropped by of a summer evening. It was hot and the Heath family had brought chairs out on the lawn because it was cooler there. Heath got me a chair and we sat and talked, not about anything in particular, but whatever came into our heads.

There was no moon, but there were a lot of stars and they were the prettiest I have ever seen them.

I called Heath's attention to them and, just shooting off my mouth, I told him what little I'd picked up about astronomy.

"They're a long ways off," I said. "So far off that their light takes years to reach us. And all of them are suns. A lot of them bigger than our sun."

Which was about all I knew about the stars.

Heath nodded gravely.

"There's one up there", he said, "that I watch a lot. That blue one, over there. Well, sort of blue, anyhow. See it? See how it twinkles. Like it might be winking at us. A friendly sort of star."

I pretended that I saw the one he was pointing at, although I wasn't sure I did, there were so many of them and a lot of them were twinkling.

Then we got to talking about something else and forgot about the stars. Or at least I did.

Right after supper, Bert Smith came over and said that

Rickard had been around asking him some questions and that he'd been down to Jingo's place and that he'd said he'd see

Heath just as soon as Heath got back from town.

Bert was a bit upset about it, so I tried to calm him down.

"These city folks get excited easy," I told him. "There's nothing to it."

I didn't worry much about it because I felt sure that Heath could handle things and even if Rickard did write a story for the New York papers it wouldn't bother us. Coon Valley is a long piece from New York.

I figured we'd probably seen and heard the last from Rickard.

But in all my life, I've never been more wrong.

About midnight or so I woke up with Helen shaking me.

"There's someone at the door," she said. "Go see who it is."

So I shucked into my overalls and shoes and lit the lamp and went downstairs to see.

While I'd been getting dressed there'd been some knocking at the door, but as soon as I lit the lamp it quit.

I went to the door and opened it and there stood Rickard and he wasn't near as chipper as he'd been in the morning.

"Sorry to get you up," he said, "but it seems that I'm lost."

"You can't be lost," I told him. "There isn't but one road through the valley. One end of it ties up to Sixty and the other to Eighty-five. You follow the valley road and you're bound to hit one or the other of them."

"I've been driving", he told me, "for the last four hours and I can't find either of them."

"Look," I said, "all you do is drive one way or the other.

You can't get off the road. Fifteen minutes either way and you're on a state highway."

I was exasperated with him, for it seemed a silly thing to do.

And I don't take kindly to being routed out at midnight.

"But I tell you I'm lost," he said in a sort of desperation and

I could see that he was close to panic. "The wife is getting scared and the kids are dead on their feet

.... "

"All right," I told him. "Let me get on my shirt and tie my shoes. I'll get you out of here."

He told me he wanted to get to Sixty, so I got out my car and told him to follow me. I was pretty sore about it, but I figured the only thing to do was to help him out. He'd upset the valley and the sooner out the better.

I drove for thirty minutes before I began to get confused myself. That was twice as long as it should have taken to get out to the highway. But the road looked all right and there seemed to be nothing wrong, except for the time it took. So I kept on going. At the end of forty-five minutes we were back in front of my place again.

I couldn't figure it out for the life of me. I got out of my car and went back to Rickard's car.

"You see what I mean," he said.

"We must have got turned around," I said.

His wife was almost hysterical.

"What's going on?" she asked me in a high, shrill voice.

"What is going on around here?"

"We'll try again," I said. "We'll drive slower this time so we don't make the same mistake."

I drove slower and this time it took an hour to get back to the farm. So we tried for Eighty-five and forty minutes later were right back where we started.

"I give up," I told them. "Get out and come in. We'll fix up some beds. You can spend the night and we'll get you out come light."

I cooked up some coffee and found stuff to make sandwiches while Helen fixed up beds to take care of the five of them.

"The dog can sleep out here in the kitchen," she said.

I got an apple box and quilt and fixed the dog a bed.

The dog was a nice little fellow, a wirehair who was full of fun, and the Rickard kids were about as fine a bunch of kids as you'd find anywhere.

Mrs. Rickard was all set to have hysterics, but Helen got her to drink some coffee and I wouldn't let them talk about not being able to get out.

"Come daylight," I told them, "and there'll be nothing to it."

After breakfast they were considerably calmed down and seemed to have no doubt they could find Number Sixty. So they started out alone, but in an hour were back again. I took my car and started out ahead of them and I don't rain, admitting I could feel bare feet walking up and down my spin~

I watched closely and all at once I realized that somehow we were headed back into the valley instead of heading out of it

So I stopped the car and we turned our cars around and headed back in the right direction. But in ten minutes we were turned around again. We tried again and this time we fairly crawled, trying to spot the place where we got turned around

But we could never spot it.

We went back to my place and I called up Bert and Jing and asked them to come over.

Both of them tried to lead the Rickards out, one at a time then the two of them together, but they were no better at it than

I was. Then I tried it alone, without the Rickards following me and I had no trouble at all. I was out to highway Sixty and back in half an hour. So we thought maybe the jinx was broken and I tried to lead out the Rickard car, but it was no soap.

By mid-afternoon we knew the answer. Any of the natives could get out of the valley, but the Rickards couldn't.

Helen put Mrs. Rickard to bed and fed her some sedative and I went over to see Heath.

He was glad to see me and he listened to me, but all the time

I was talking to him I kept remembering how one time I had wondered if maybe he could stretch out time. When I had finished he was silent for a while, as if he might have been going over some decision just to be certain that it was right.

"It's a strange business, Calvin," he said finally, "and it doesn't seem right the Rickards should be trapped in this valley if they don't want to stay here.

"Yet, it's a fortunate thing for us, actually. Rickard was planning on writing a story about us and if he'd written as he planned to, there'd been a lot of attention paid us. There would have been a crowd of people coming in--other newspapermen and government men and people from the universities and the idly curious. They'd have upset our lives and some of them taking it somewhat better and the Rickard kids were happy with the outdoor life and the Rickard dog was busily engaged in running all the valley rabbits down to skin and bones.

"There's the old Chandler place up at the head of the valley," said Jingo. "No one's been living there for quite a while, but it's in good shape. It could be fixed up so it was comfortable."

"But I can't stay here," protested Rickard. "I can't settle down here."

"Who said anything about settling down?" asked Bert. "You just got to wait it out. Some day whatever is wrong will get straightened out and then you can get away." "But my job," said Rickard.

Mrs. Rickard spoke up then. You could see she didn't like the situation any better than he did, but she had that queer, practical, everyday logic that a woman at times surprises a man by showing. She knew that they were stuck here in the valley and she was out to make the best of it.

"Remember that book you're always threatening to write?" she asked. "Maybe this is it." That did it.

Rickard mooned around for a while, making up his mind, although it already was made up. Then he began talking about the peace in the valley--the peace and quietness and the lack of hurry--just the place to write a book.

The neighbours got together and fixed up the house on the old Chandler place and Rickard called his office and made some excuse and got a leave of absence and wrote a letter to his bank, transferring whatever funds he had. Then he settled down to write.

Apparently in his phone calls and his letter-writing he never even hinted at the real reason for his staying--perhaps because it would have sounded downright silly--for there was no ruckus over his failure to go back.

The valley settled down to its normal life again and it felt good after all the uproar. The neighbours shopped for the Rickards and carried out from town all the groceries and other things they needed and once in a while Rickard took the car and had a try at finding the state highways.

But mostly he wrote and in about a year he sold this book of his. ProbaNy you have read it: You Could Hear the Silence.

Made him a hunk of money. But his New York publishers still are going slowly mad trying to understand why he steadfastly refuses to stir out of the valley. He has refused lecture tours, has declined dinners in his honour and turned down all the other glitter that goes with writing a best seller.

The book didn't change Rickard at all. By the time he sold it he was well liked in the valley and seemed to like everyonem except possibly Heath. He stayed rather cold to Heath. He used to do a lot of walking, to get exercise, he said, although I think that he thought up most of his book out on those walks. And he'd stop by and chew the fat when he was out on those walks and that way everyone got to know him. He used to talk a lot about when he could get out of the valley and all of us were beginning to feel sorry that a time would come when he would leave, for the Rickards had turned out to be good neighbours.

There must be something about the valley that brings out the best there is in everyone. As I have said before, we have yet to get a bad neighbour and that is something most neighbourhoods can't say.

One day I had stopped on my way from town to talk a while with Heath and as we stood talking, up the road came Rickard.

You could see he wasn't going anywhere, but was just out for a walk.

He stopped and talked with us for a few minutes, then suddenly he said, "You know, we've made up our minds that we would like to stay here."

"Now, that is fine," said Heath.

"Grace and I were talking about it the other night," said Rickard. "About the time when we could get out of here. Then suddenly we stopped our talking and looked at one another and we knew right then and there we didn't want to leave. It's been so peaceful and the kids like the school here so much better than in the city and the people are so fine we couldn't bear to leave."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Heath told him. "But it seems to me you've been sticking pretty close. You ought to take the wife and kids in town to see a show." And that was it. It was as simple as all that.

Life goes on in the valley as it always has, except it's even better now. All of us are healthy. We don't even seem to get colds any more. When we need rain we get it and when there's need of sun the sun is sure to shine. We aren't getting rich, for you can't get rich with all this Washington interference, but we're making a right good living. Rickard is working on his second book and once in a while I go out at night and try to locate the star Heath showed me that evening long ago.

But we still get some publicity now and then. The other night

I was listening to my favourite newscaster and he had an item he had a lot of fun with.

"Is there really such a place as Coon Valley?" he asked and you could hear the chuckle just behind the words. "If there is, the government would like to know about it. The maps insist there is and there are statistics on the books that say it's a place where there is no sickness, where the climate is ideal, where there's never a crop failure--a land of milk and honey.

Investigators have gone out to seek the truth of this and they can't find the place, although people in nearby communities insist there's such a valley. Telephone calls have been made to people listed as residents of the valley, but the calls can't be completed. Letters have been written to them, but the letters are returned to the sender for one or another of the many reasons the post office has for non-delivery. Investigators have waited in nearby trading centres, but Coon Valley people never came to town while the investigators were there. If there is such a place and if the things the statistics say of it are true, the government would be very interested, for there must be data in the valley that could be studied and applied to other sectors.

We have no way of knowing whether this broadcast can reach the valley--if it is any more efficient than investigators or telephone or the postal service. But if it does--and if there is such a place as Coon Valley--and if one of its residents should be listening, won't he please speak up!"

He chuckled then, chuckled very briefly, and went on to tell the latest rumour about Khrushchev.

I shut off the radio and sat in my chair and thought about the times when for several days no one could find his way out of the valley and of the other times when the telephones went dead for no apparent reason. And I remembered how we'd talked about it among ourselves and wondered if we should speak to Heath about it, but had in each case decided not to, since we felt that

Heath knew what he was doing and that we could trust his judgment.

It's inconvenient at times, of course, but there are a lot of compensations. There hasn't been a magazine salesman in the valley for more than a dozen years--nor an insurance salesman, either.